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THE METRICAL FORMS USED BY CERTAIN
VICTORIAN POETS.

INCIDENTALLY to a broader piece of work I have lately performed the mechanical task of counting the number of metrical forms employed respectively by three of the most prolific Victorian poets. To print the classification in full is out of the question in a periodical article, but the result seems of sufficient interest to warrant summary statement with the minimum of explanation. The bare final figures are as follows :

Browning, about two hundred (200) forms. This includes about 15 different movements where stanzas are either lacking or of irregular length and which are irregular also in the number of stresses (feet) to a line, generally in the kind of feet used, and in the rime-system. (Some of these irregular movements are of the "choric ode" class.)

Tennyson, about two hundred and forty (240) forms, including about 35 different irregular movements.

Swinburne, about four hundred and twenty (420) forms, including about half a dozen different irregular movements.

These figures do not include poems in foreign languages, of which Tennyson has two forms in Latin and Swinburne fourteen in French and Latin. The count is based for Tennyson on the poems and dramas included in the standard collective editions; for Browning, on all the known extant poems and dramas (substantially as collected in the "Camberwell" edition); for Swinburne, on all the dramas, and the poems in the six-volume collective edition, omitting the *Heptalogia* of parodies.

The enumeration, in the main, is of the various kinds of units of which the poems are immediately composed. By *unit* I mean *stanza* when one regular stanza is used throughout;

distinct passage or *whole poem* when stanzas are lacking or irregular and stress or rime or both irregular; in most other cases, *couplet* or *single line*. In the case of individual poems composed of different units I have counted the units separately when they are combined irregularly (for example when a stanza riming *a b b a* occurs sporadically in a poem composed mostly of stanzas riming *a b a b*); but have treated the whole poem as the unit when the combination is in accordance with a definite artificial system, as for instance in the *ballade* or the sonnet.

I have stated the figures approximately for two reasons: (1) The question of distinctions must be decided by individual judgment more often than one who has not had experience would suppose. (2) In any count there must almost certainly be some errors, due to the difficulty of applying with absolute consistency whatever principles may be adopted. It would be very unreasonable to demand that such a count be altogether proof against criticism. But I believe that the figures given are trustworthy in the main. Certainly they indicate with sufficient accuracy the comparative numbers of forms used by the respective poets considered.

Some further explanation is evidently required. My four principal criteria, naturally, are: (1) Number of lines in a unit (not applicable where the lines are not regularly grouped). (2) Number of stresses (feet) in the line. (3) Rime-system. (4) Kind of feet employed. In making the classification, as a matter of fact, I have applied these criteria in the order in which they are here named. I have also set by themselves imitations of classical meters and artificial forms like the *ballade* and the sonnet. Except in a few cases I have not found any other feet than iambs, anapæsts, trochees, dactyls, and spondees; and I have never recognized the spondee in making distinctions, but have always treated it as a substitute or equivalent for some other foot. I employ these names in the usual anglicized senses, with reference simply to stress, except in the case of the (quantitative) spondee.

In connection with the fourth criterion just mentioned considerable attention has to be paid to the omission (truncation) of unaccented syllables at the beginning or end of lines and to the addition of unaccented syllables either initial (anacrusis) or final. Of course these processes, when initial, are generally identical with change from iambic to trochaic movement or from anapæstic to dactylic or *vice versa*, and when final are identical with change from single (masculine) to double (feminine) or triple endings or *vice versa*. I have not considered their occasional irregular appearance as a sufficient mark of distinction; but I have so considered not only their regular appearance in fixed places but also their frequent irregular appearance. A hypothetical normal illustration may make this clearer. In the case of several iambic and trochaic poems in four-line stanzas with the same number of stresses to a line, the same rime-system, and lines always or almost always ending in a stressed syllable—aside from possible forms in which certain fixed lines were always iambic and the others always trochaic, I should count three forms: (1) those which are almost uniformly iambic, that is, whose lines almost always begin with an unstressed syllable; (2) those which are almost always trochaic, that is, whose lines almost always begin with a stressed syllable; (3) those in which, whether or not one sort of line or the other may predominate, both occur frequently. So with feminine endings. My procedure has been similar as regards the use of feet individually interchangeable. That is, I have not taken account of the occasional appearance of an anapæst in an iambic measure or of a dactyl in a trochaic measure, but have distinguished meters in which anapæsts and iambs are both frequent both from those wholly or almost wholly iambic and from those wholly or almost wholly anapæstic.

I have always recognized medial rime as a differentia—as a matter of fact, partly to avoid inconsistencies, I have always counted a separate line for each rime. I have generally accepted stanza divisions as indicated by the poets themselves. Thus, I

have distinguished an eight-line stanza which is metrically only a four-line stanza doubled (rime-system *a b a b c d c d*) from the same four-line stanza (*a b a b*) employed as a unit; this because the sense divisions usually correspond to the stanza divisions and have weight in the metrical effect. But in the case of couplets the poets sometimes make stanza-groupings which seem arbitrary; these I have disregarded. I have recognized refrains as regular criteria of distinction.

The most difficult and least satisfactory part of the count is the attempt to classify the passages which are irregular in all respects. I presume that some other students would make fewer distinctions among them than I have made, at least in the case of Tennyson.

I have counted prose and unrimed iambic pentameter (ordinary blank verse) each as one form; except that I have distinguished as separate forms the stichic verse of Greek drama (dialog where each speech occupies a single line) and blank verse with feminine endings in several successive lines (Browning). I have arbitrarily distinguished three and only three kinds of sonnets in iambic pentameter: (1) the "Italian" (without taking account of the arrangement of rimes in the sestet); (2) the "Elizabethan"; (3) all others. (It is interesting to note incidentally that none of the poets considered employs the "Elizabethan" form except Swinburne, and he in only five of his later sonnets—vol. VI—though he has a very large number in the "Italian" form). But I have, in sonnets as in other poems, recognized as *differentiae* variations in the number of accents and kind of feet employed and the introduction of feminine rimes. This gives Swinburne nine varieties of sonnets; for he uses lines of six, seven, and eight accents, and trochees and anapæsts as well as iambs.

It scarcely need be observed that Swinburne's remarkable numerical superiority to the other two poets is due largely to his instinctive and irrepressible facility in the use of minor devices of variation. Browning and Tennyson, further, scarcely employ at all other artificial forms than the sonnet; but Swin-

burne uses such forms often, chiefly the *ballade* and the roundel. He has 38 varieties of roundels (the difference is sometimes only in the refrains) and 20 varieties of *ballades*, besides two of *double ballades*.

From many points of view the significance of the figures here given is obviously decreased by the fact that any trifling meter used in only a single poem counts for as much as any one of the best meters, like unrimed iambic pentameter, employed in thousands of lines of the greatest work. But all such considerations are irrelevant to the present purpose.

It is interesting to note that Milton in his English poems uses only about 30 forms, including six or eight irregular ones; and Chaucer 23, all regular, among them ten forms of *ballades* and *envoys*.¹ Let me distinctly disclaim, however, any such intention as that of suggesting that a poet's greatness can be measured by the number of forms which he employs.

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¹This estimate includes the four short pieces printed as doubtful by Skeat, of which three, according to my classification, are unique in form. It would be irrelevant to urge that much of Chaucer's early work has very likely been lost; for substantially the same thing is true of Tennyson and Browning, at least. Apart from prose, all Chaucer's meters are prevailingly iambic except that of the two four-line *Proverbs*, which are prevailingly trochaic; and all are in lines of five accents except three meters, namely: (1) that of the insignificant *Proverbs* just mentioned; (2) the romance stanza which Chaucer uses satirically in *Sir Thopas*; (3) the octosyllabic couplet which he uses in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, *The Bok of the Duchesse*, and *The Hous of Fame*.